6-27-2003

Vincent Ahern oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, June 27, 2003

Vincent R. Ahern (Interviewee)

Yael V. Greenburg (Interviewer)

COPYRIGHT NOTICE

USF Florida Studies Center
Oral History Program
USF 50th History Anniversary Project

Narrator: Vincent R. Ahern (A)
Current Position: Coordinator of Public Art At the Institute for Research in Art
Date of Interview: June 27, 2003
Audit Editor: Danielle E. Riley
Date Audit Edit Completed: Nov. 15, 2003

Interviewer: Yael V. Greenberg (G)
Location of Interview: Tampa Campus Library
Transcriber: University of Florida
Final Editor: Jared G. Toney

TRANSCRIPTION

G: Today is Friday, June 27, 2003. My name is Yael Greenberg, Oral History Program Assistant for the Florida Studies Center. We continue a series of interviews here in our studio in the Tampa campus library with USF faculty, students, staff, and alumni in order to commemorate fifty years of university history. Today, we will be interviewing Mr. Vincent Ahern who came to USF in 1976 as a student. He received his MFA degree in 1982, and currently he is the coordinator of public art for the Institute for Research in Art for the University of South Florida. Good morning, Mr. Ahern.

A: Good morning.

G: Let's begin by you taking us to the year you arrived in Tampa and what circumstances brought you to the University of South Florida.

A: Well, I had received a degree from Appalachian State University in 1971 thinking that I would eventually go into law. Over the course of the 1970s I debated back and forth on what I actually was going to study and do in graduate school. Eventually [I] came to the conclusion that I wanted to pursue art. I had spent some time out in San Francisco, visited a number of museums, and became intrigued with what was possible with the arts.

After coming to the conclusion that I wanted to study art, I started looking for universities. The track record of the University of South Florida, particularly with graphic studio, intrigued me. I decided to pursue and undergraduate degree here. I continued on and did my masters degree, and, as you just mentioned, finished that up in 1982.

G: What kinds of things in the early 1970s were you hearing about the art program at USF?

A: One of the things that really intrigued me was they were bringing the major contributors in the field of the arts to the university to do projects that involved the faculty, but also allowed the students access to these artists. At that point in time, I was obviously a more mature individual than your typical freshman, if you will. I realized that was a wonderful opportunity to get engaged in the very core of what was happening in the arts. That access to professionals who had arrived at a degree of achievement in the field really intrigued me, and that's what brought me to USF.

G: Can you tell me a little bit of who were some of these professionals in those early days?

A: Sure, [there were] people like James Rosenquist who has continued to have a long and lasting relationship with the University of South Florida. Currently, there is a retrospective of his work underway at the Guggenheim Museum. It opened in Texas just a few months ago; will travel on to New York; eventually on to Bilbao, Spain. It's a major opportunity, obviously, for any artist to have a retrospective, and to have it organized by one of the major museums is clearly a barometer of his accomplishment. There were others. Bill Pearlstein was here [and] Bob Rauschenberg. Really the major contributors that were available were brought in to graphic studio at that point in time. As I say, that intrigued me.

G: Can you tell me the first time you saw the university campus as a student? What did it look like? What did some of the immediate surrounding areas look like as well?

A: You know this is remarkable because of what I've ended up doing with the university, but I clearly recall the very first day that stepped onto campus and looked at the vast open spaces. At that point in time [I] had acquired a bit of a background in art, and so [I] realized there were opportunities in the environment for sculpture or for art. My very first impression was wow, where's the sculpture park? This is a great opportunity to build permanent works in the environment. It's a passing thought, but yes the vastness of the university really took my breath away.

G: You went on from and undergraduate degree to a master's degree in fine arts, and then you graduated in 1982?

A: That's right.

G: How did you come to be, eventually several years down the road, the coordinator of the Public Art Program here at the university?

A: Well, the very last semester that I was here as an undergraduate I had the opportunity to work on a public art project with Alice Aycock. It was a temporary project that was done largely graded by the students under Alice's direction. [It] eventually represented Alice in the 1981 Whitney biannual. As I said, the work was temporary in nature. It was constructed, and a few years later it was taken down. I sort of put my foot in the world of public art at that point in time. As time passed on my degree was a master's in fine art in the area of sculpture. My interest obviously lay in sculpture, which is largely what is done in the public art realm. Both in terms of technical background and in terms of art historical background, that suited the needs of the university to a tee when they began

created public works. It happened that Margaret Miller, who was the director of the museum at that point in time, 1989, needed to find someone to run the first public art project that was to be commissioned for the campus. This was a work by Alan Zimmerman for the H. Lee Moffett Cancer Center. Initially, Margaret asked me if I would assist her in developing a contract. We needed to put a contract in place with Alan for the project, and the university was struggling with this because their model for permanent structures is architectural in nature, which is a very extensive detailed contract struck with a very large firm. Artists aren't very large firms, they're individuals. Essentially, it's a cottage industry. So what was happening was the university had this humongous contract, the artist couldn't accept all of the responsibilities and liabilities associated with such a contract, so they were back and forth really for over a year. She asked me if I would meet with the university attorneys and with the artist and see if I couldn't punch in as kind of a mediator. I did that, we were able to come to terms that worked for both the university and the artist within a month of full time attention. At that point in time Alice had gained a kind of rapport with Allen and she asked if I would be willing to manage the project. The reason that she needed that assistance is she was doing two other projects simultaneously with the one at USF and they were both on the West Coast, one in Las Angeles and one in the San Francisco. The time that she would have to devote to the day in day out details of this project simply wasn't available. I agreed, and we were off and running. I quickly gained an awful lot of enthusiasm for what was possible in the public realm. Unlike most art that is shown in galleries and museums, public artworks are shown in the public environment. Therefore, there's this public interaction and the folks that don't typically come into a museum do encounter

public works. The kind of dialogue, the kind of education that I saw happening before me as we constructed this piece really left a lasting impression, thinking that there's a great value that works in the public realm can give to society. So I because enthusiastic. We had other project coming up. Allen was quite satisfied with the work that I had done as was Margaret, so she asked me if I would continue and organize future projects and I said sure. We were off and running. I was hired initially on soft money, and then eventually a faculty line was developed so that I could continue on in the position, and thirteen or fourteen years later, here we are.

G: Prior to you becoming the official coordinator of the Public Art Program here at the university, what did the university do with public arts projects? I know there were public arts projects before 1989 at the university.

A: There were, but there were very few of them. Joe Testa-Secca, as you know, was commissioned. There was a marvelous kind of history involved with that, but the very first projects that were done at the university were done in the same time frame that the very first buildings were being constructed. Mr. Testa-Secca received commissions for both the administration building and the science auditorium back in 1960. After that, there were very few public art projects, in fact none that I'm familiar with, until legislation was passed by the state of Florida in 1979 establishing the Art and State Buildings Program. This is a program where one half of one percent of any new construction funds are set aside for either the purchase or commission of art works. So obviously that set in motion, in a formal sense, the beginning of collection development in the public realm. However, it took the Florida Arts Council, which was responsible for setting up the guidelines, some six years to establish those guidelines. Really, only three

projects that I'm aware of occurred prior to my assuming the role as coordinator of public art. Those were handled by Margaret Miller, who was also responsible for directing the Contemporary Art Museum. She quickly became aware, as I had mentioned, with the Alan Zimmerman project that public art was going to be a full time responsibility. She couldn't do both that and direct the museum simultaneously, and thus the need for a position such as mine.

G: Obviously there was becoming more of a need for somebody to take hold of these art projects, but why do you think USF, maybe particularly in those early days, wanted public art on the campus?

A: I know President Allen in one point in time said that the arts would be his football team, that he was a great supporter of culture. [He] saw that culture in the arts would feed the environment that really we all come to expect from a university. My suspicion is that Dr. Allen had an awful lot to do with that, and then we were fortunate in that the early faculty members in the art department. People like Harrison Covington**,** who went on to become Dean Emeritus of the College, [were] hired very early and brought to the position great enthusiasm, great passion, great determination. So [these people] developed a very significant program in the early 1960s so that by the late 1960s, for instance, we had people like Donald Sachs founding an institution that's become an internationally renown graphic studio, and out of this sort of determination, passion, and desire to build a significant arts environment for the Tampa campus. I think it's a culmination or a confluence of the energies of a president with great vision, early faculty with both vision and enthusiasm and energy, and then good hires that built a very strong program.

G: Has that mission changed? Is the university interested in putting up public art for

different reasons today than it was in those early days?

A: You know I talk about my first early days as director or coordinator of the Public Art Program as my stealth years. By that I mean that really not a whole lot of folks were paying attention to what kinds of projects we were taking on. What we were trying to do is, again, work with the very best artists that were out in the world. We brought in people that had established major careers in the field of public art and took on very ambitious projects, projects that if we limited ourselves to that one half of 1 percent would not have been possible. I think here an important fact to insert is that we have a collection now valued at approximately $2.5 million. Of that expenditure, $1.3 million has come from gifts from the private sector. We've really maximized the dollars available for public art. To do so early on was kind of tak[ing] a risk. To say well if we're going to do this let's do it right, and doing it right means we're going to have to raise some additional funds, so let's select artists who can excite the community and take the chance that we get the monies necessary to build the project. Obviously we couldn't build it without getting the money but we had already made an investment in time in these artists. We were fortunate in that the Tampa Bay area was extremely generous. We also developed other strategies that enabled us to expand the budgets of these projects. We used the intellectual resources of the university. It's a great treasure chest of individuals who contributed in kind gifts valued at tens of thousands of dollars. We talked to the architects for the facilities in planning and also for the particular buildings and said look, you've got money for sidewalks, you've got money for lighting, the artist could contribute these things. Perhaps we could take the money that's line itemed for those needs and put it in the public arts budget. Through a series of strategies and the

generosity of the community we were able to take on, as I say again, very ambitious projects. When I now talk to my colleagues around the country, and they are aware of the collection that we have because it's gained some national attention, and they realize what the budgets are for our startup for projects they're astonished that we have the collection that we do. Again, I think a series of strategies; a willingness to carry on kind of the tradition started with President Allen, Harrison Covington, and others; you know pushing to be the very best we possibly could be has made it possible to develop the collection. Does the university build projects now for different reasons? Yes, the stealth years are over. In a real sense, the projects that we did, did come to the attention of the central administration and they realized that they had in place now gathering places of structures that really were having a very significant impact on the look and feel of the environment of the university. These were places. Often times the projects we took on weren't just that, they weren't just objects, they were places that we were developing. They were places that were being utilized by faculty, students, staff, [and] visitors. They also realize that, as any educator will, a significant portion of education happens outside of the formal confines of the laboratory or the classroom, and we were providing places for those kinds of dialogues to occur and for that kind of education to happen that weren't there. Literally, when I came here I was impressed with the vast open spaces, but I was ultimately impressed with the fact that there wasn't a bench to sit on any place. You walked a mile and a half across this campus through, at that point in time, a fairly hot environment with little shade from trees and no place to sit down, no place to be on campus. The university has evolved a sense of what this place should be. One of the things I know they want is for students to spend more time on campus. We've been able

to give to the university not only aesthetically important projects, but I think [we've] developed places that allow students to stay on campus. So, I think in a way it has changed. We've also become a research institute, and much of what we do in the way of developing projects is very much engaged in the forefront of research in our respective field.

G: You mentioned the idea that the Public Art Program at the university is nationally recognized as a significant collection. In terms of other universities similar to our size, particularly in Florida, how are we doing? Are we ahead of the curve? Are we right where we should be? I don't necessarily think it's a competition, but how do we stack up to other universities?

7: Well we are ahead of the curve, not to pat myself on the back, because this has been the cause of many people including a number of presidents of the university. One of the things that we did before anybody else was to hire someone full-time, myself, to administer the program. When the administration, forming the Art in State Buildings Program was passed it was passed in such a fashion that projects could be funded but there was little or no money to administer the program, and also [there was] no money to maintain the projects once they were done. As I mentioned, I was hired on soft money; money, in other words, raised by the contemporary art museum because Margaret Miller, the director, also visionary, recognized that the potential for this program was great but it was going to require someone to put their full time energies into developing it. We really led the way in terms of having a full time administrator for the Public Art Program. Even now, although other universities [such as] the University of Florida; Florida State; to a limited degree, the University of Central Florida, has caught on. They've caught on from

our model of having a full time administrator, other than that it would be a voluntary basis. These projects take years to develop. It requires not only that the administrator serve as a liaison between a myriad of people that get involved in a project; subcontractors, folks from facilities and planning, folks from physical plant, obviously finance and planning. All of those components come into a project. If you think of an artist coming from another city, out of state, having to deal with thirty or forty individuals embedded in our system, it's a daunting task. Over time, obviously an administrator can become familiar with who his folks are and how to get things done. So that role has been critical, but even more so the ability for an individual to devout full time attention to the artist's ideas. One of the differences between art and the public realm, and again the sort of work that you might see in a museum and gallery, is that when we select an artist we don't give them a check and say do your thing and we'll all sit back and be amazed, it's a dialogue. It's a dialogue between a selection committee that is carried on in between meetings obviously by the administrator for the program. That dialogue between the public and the artist is one of those things that distinguishes the development of working in the public realm. You need a full time person to do that. Different artists have different needs. Some of them need help in identifying subcontractors; some of them need sort of ongoing encouragement, pulling the ideas, if you will, out; others simply need support in the fashion of an awful lot of things to get done, they can't handle it all themselves, can you assist them, of course we can assist them. We find ways to do that. As I mentioned, we've turned to the university's resources. Students, faculty, and staff have been involved in these projects. Well, an artist doesn't have time, living in New York city, to identify a Jack Robinson, professor emeritus from archeo-astronomy, who

spent three years of time working with the artist Nancy Holt on the project Solar Rotary, to make that possible. But, I do. We can have a wonderful experience with those people because they're involved and because we get to know them so personally, but also they have a wonderful contribution to give to the program. All of that's made possible by having someone who can focus on issues like that, so that has put us ahead of the curve, if you will, in the state of Florida.

G: Before we talk a little bit about the particular projects in the Public Art Program I want to see if you can take me through the process of a single project from the beginning stages to the end? How do you find an artist? Take me from conception to placing the actual piece of work on the campus.

A: The very first thing that happens [is] I get a copy of project schedule for facilities and planning for new facilities including budget and time of implementation, when construction will begin, when the architects will be hired and so on and so forth. Over the course of the last decade we've evolved a system with the director of Facilities and Planning that when that information is available and when we see we have a project coming up, I will typically meet with the director of Facilities and Planning and say, "what's the opportunities here from an architects point of you, what types of sights might we be looking at?" Obviously, I have in mind the budget that we have going into it, so I put the notion of opportunity together with budget and my wheels begin to turn. Once that happens I organize a committee. Part of the organization of that committee is dictated by the guidelines that are produced for the program by the Florida Arts Council. It stipulates that certain individuals will be voting members of that committee. There are two art experts that I identify that will be voting members. The architect for the facility if

a voting member and an occupant is a voting member. The user agency representative, which [is] the role that I play on projects, is also a voting member. There are five of us who will vote. Well that's fine but it isn't necessarily enough. There are other experts that really contribute to the project. One of those experts, clearly, is the director of Facilities and Planning. I always invite that individual to participate in a program, and under the years that Steven Gift was here Steve came to every meeting that we had. We've now had a change in leadership in that position. Ron Hanke is the new director, and Barbara Donerly has assumed the role that Steve Gift had previously played. Adrian Cuarta, who is the director of Physical Plant, brings a wealth of information and obviously is responsible for maintaining the university in the broadest sense. So he is a real asset in our selection process and attends all meetings. He can help us identify a potential maintenance problem before we build it into the program. Again, an ex-officio member for, not voting, but very much contributing to the dialogue, and it's a dialogue we all hear. Sometimes, depending on the situation, a single occupant isn't enough. There may be a variety of faculty who have special interests. It might be students who have a special interest in the project we're going to undertake, so we invite them to serve on the committee. A committee is formed, bringing together all of these people. The first thing we do is to decide what we're going to try to do with the project. We write a program the same way you would write a program if you were building a building. Do we want a fountain? Do we want a mural? Do we want an icon for a particular location? Do we want a garden? We make a description of what it is we want, and then that's factored into the possible sights that are available and the size of the budget, and then another part of the equation comes into play. We're typically dealing, as I say, the

occupant is generally the head administrative official for the college that's getting a new facility. So often times it's the dean, or someone the dean has appointed at any rate, and we turn to that individual and say we've got $37,000 and our ambition suggests we're trying to do something in the realm of $100,000 or a $150,000. This means fundraising. Are you willing to make this a priority in terms of identifying a potential donor to contribute to this project. The answer to that question is fundamental with where we go next, which is to identify potential artists. Obviously, if you have $160,000 versus $37,000 you can look at more established artists. Also, the scale of the project can be grander and so on. Really it's which list of artists you can go to. I don't mean to say that in a demeaning fashion at all because I am equally proud with the projects we have done with regional artists as I am with the projects we've done with internationally renowned artists. It gives one an indication of where they can go. The people who identify potential artists for the project are myself and the two art experts on the committee. Occasionally, the architect for the facility will contribute notions. That's the general approach. What we do, once we've decided on what group of artists we're going after, and of course it's based in part on what kind of project we're trying to do as well as the budget, we then begin to identify potential candidates. [We do this] first by name, and then eventually I contact this people, have a phone conversation with them. I tell them about the project, the time line, the budget, what we're trying to accomplish and see whether or not they're interested. If they are, I have them send me slides, catalogues, videos, whatever information we can gather to help the committee and I become more familiar with the artist, and we proceed to review that material in a meeting. We select them in that review meeting from slides, the presentation that I make. We select three

finalists, typically, and invite those three finalists in for a kind of interview. We have to make a presentation of the work previously completed and talk to us about their sense of this project, how they might approach it. Based on that interview we select the finalist and enter into an agreement for the design of the project, eventually leading to the fabrication of the project. So it's a two-part agreement: design development, fabrication installation. Again, [it is] modeled somewhat on that architectural model that one deals with when they're building permanent facilities, but scaled down and worked in detail so that it works, again, the artist and the university.

G: What is the average time length of a public art project from beginning to end?

A: If I had to pick an average off the top of my head I would say three years. Some have been done in a shorter time frame; some have taken longer. We've worked as long as four or five years on projects. There are smaller budgets. Maybe we're commissioning a painting, maybe we would complete that in a year. There's a good reason for the time frame. Part of it is the selection process that I've just run through for you, but in kind of an abbreviated fashion [we] said okay we have a design development process. Well, that's another whole set of steps that built in for very good reasons. We want the artist to create projects that are site specific, site responsive, site-sensitive. All those words [have] slightly different nuance of meaning, but they all get back to the fact that what we're asking artists to do is to not dream something up in their studio without ever having seen the university or [without] understanding the college that it's being built for, or the audience that will come to enjoy it, or the history of this place. We want them to mind the history of the university; come to an understanding of what that site is in the broadest sense of the word, not just physical location but what it is in terms of discipline, what it is

in terms of history of that discipline, who the individuals are, that are not only students but also faculty. If they're doing research [we want them to understand] what that research is. From this, amazingly, ideas [and] images emerge. Often times the artist is meeting with, let's say it's a science center, a group of scientists doing research. I can give you an example. Over in St. Petersburg Ned Smith did a project called Our Shadow, based on the black dragon fish that lives a mile deep in the water and has this capacity to illuminate itself through a photochemical process. At that depth there is virtually no light. It's lighting up the edges of its body, almost like neon light, to attract bait that it consumes. Well this fish can't be brought up alive, because the pressure changes from that depth to the surface would be such that it would crush the fish. A researcher for the Knight Oceanographic Research Center was often doing research in the deep trenches of the Pacific. [He] came in to Dr. Peter Betzer's office, the director of the center, at the same time that I was there with the artist Ned Smith. Ned was talking to the other scientists about what visuals come out of their images, and he said, " I've got it." He was walking into the office holding up this videotape. Peter said, " You've got it? What is it?" He said we've got a videotape of Idiacanthus Atlanticus, the black dragonfish. He put it into the VCR and up pops this amazing fish. That fish becomes the core of the project that Ned does for the Knight Oceanographic Center lobby on the wall, twenty-eight feet long [and] eight feet high. [He did] a mosaic on a cement surface using an Italian tile embedded with gold. He replicates the vision of the black dragon fish as it was seen on that photograph. It's accompanied by other elements, what he calls a seabed, a seating area made from coral. [It also has] a series of columns that rises up from the floor of the lobby, again, utilizing coral, which has the history of sea life embedded in it,

to make a project that announces to the visitor at the Knight Oceanographic Center what it's about. It kind of opens the door [if you will] for the visitor, the student, the faculty, as they enter into that facility. [It's] a wonderful kind of merging of the site, in the broadest sense, and the artist's vision. It's this kind of phenomena that continues to leave me very enthusiastic about what's possible with public art.

G: I want to move on to some of the specific projects. In preparing for this interview, and looking in old *Oracles,* we came across the idea of the Picasso. If you could enlighten us a little bit about the Picasso, because I know there is no Picasso art on campus, so if you could talk about that.

A: Sure, in 1971 [or] 1972, somewhere in that time frame, Pablo Picasso gave to the University of South Florida the rights to build one of his metal maquettes, a piece called *Bust of a Woman*. He gave those rights to the university, promising to take no fee, but with the stipulation that Carl Nesjar, a Norwegian sculptor who had introduced Picasso to a means by which large scale sculptures could be created utilizing cement, would supervise the construction of the piece. The university, very enthusiastic about the chance to build something that would obviously bring instant recognition, and planning as they were in that time frame, to build a major art center, decided to build the Picasso in conjunction with this art center. Remember the date, 1972 or 1973. If you're familiar with the history of the country at that point in time you realize we're experiencing a tremendous economic decline because of the gas crisis. People were in long lines waiting to get $5 worth of gas, and so on and so forth. The economy suffered. Obviously to build this project and to build the art center would require that kind of generosity that I mentioned earlier, because at that point in time there was no Art in State Buildings

funding. So the funding to build the project, which at that point in time amounted to about $500,000, had to be raised. We couldn't raise the funds. We did, however, do a number of things in that time frame, the university did, that would eventually come to the surface in the early 1990s. One of the things we did was an engineering study done by Griner Engineering by an individual that was hired as an engineer at the time, James Sawyer. He went by the name Tom Sawyer, he liked the connection to literature. At any rate, they created a series of maquette. They obviously engaged Carl Nesjar in the discussion, and they created an engineering study for this project that was to be, at that point in time, they were going to build it at 102 feet. It would have been large enough to have been seen from Interstate 275. It would have obviously been a dominant structure on campus. They couldn't raise the money, didn't build, and files were gathered and actually archived in the galleries that eventually would become the contemporary art museum. In 1992 [or] 1993, somewhere there about, Dr. Frank Borkowski was president at the time. I guess he must have seen some of these old *Oracles* also because he approached Margaret Miller, and Margaret, and eventually [approached] myself, with the possibility of reinvestigating the building of the Picasso. We did that. One of the first things I did was to read the old files and get an understanding of the folks involved. [I] saw the name Tom Sawyer, and so called Griner on the off-chance that he was still employed there, since he had so much information from the early effort, and he was. He said come on down. I thought I was going down to meet with an engineer, and I ended up meeting with the president of the company. He never told me he was the president of the company, he just said come on down. Anyway, he was very enthusiastic and agreed to support again the project and provide certain kind gifts, but we still were going to need

significant funds. We also would need Carl Nesjar involved, so we contacted him. Carl, as I mentioned, lives in Norway and we invited him to come to the campus and work with us in terms of what it would take and where it might be sighted and so on. We ended up doing a study that sited the project adjacent to the Lifsey House, the president's home, that was under design and development at that point in time. Then we still, obviously, had the biggest hurdle to overcome, which, again, was funding. Margaret Miller led a group that went to Spain to talk with a number of foundations. Obviously, Picasso, having been born in Spain, he was and is honored there in a number of ways including foundations that support the use of his work in images. The visit was made and we had the possibilities of funding, but we were looking at $1.5 million. At this point in time my research had continued. One of the folks that I talked to was William Rubin who had been the director of the museum of modern art and showed the maquette for our bust back in the 1960s. I asked for his input and he actually discouraged us. At this point time Picasso, [he] died in the mid 1970s, had been dead for a number of years. To build the project that many years after his death might not be something that would end up garnering an awful lot of respect. Even though Picasso gave us the right, and even though Nesjar was still alive, he felt queasy about that idea and shared that sense of concern with me. Another event occurred in that same time frame. Claude Picasso, Picasso's son, now living in Paris, contacted the university and was asking for a fee if we were to decide to build this project. Pablo obviously didn't ask for any money, but his son wanted some sort of funds to change hands if we were going to build it. He asked us to cease and desist on any further efforts until those arrangements were made. The culmination of Claude Picasso's requests and the response from the art world, really in

the form of William Rubin's comments, plus the difficulty of raising those kinds of funds, and the consequences of spending those kinds of funds, [because] its an awful lot of money to spend on the arts; all three of those things came together to convince the president that we better not continue to pursue this project. So that's the history of the Picasso as it stands today.

G: I would like to talk next about the Solar Rotary project. It seems to be a very popular place for students to hang out, if you will. I pass by it all the time. Can you talk a little bit about the unique features of it, sort of give us a little bit of a description about the Solar Rotary project?

A: Sure, it's a project by Nancy Holt. [She] was one of those artists who we, in the stealth years, identified. We decided we would go after this very ambitious project. We had, I think, at the time $40,000 to do the project. Eventually, the project would cost a little over $100,000. Nancy agreed to take it on, designed Solar Rotary as we know it today, and then told us what it would take to actually get it built. We realized we had a significant funding need. It coincided the design of Solar Rotary with the 100th anniversary of the *Tampa Tribune*. So, working with folks from development, we made an approach to the *Tribune* and they agreed to give us $57,000. In return, we, and this is really the first time we did it, realized that's more than fifty percent of the budget, let's give them a naming opportunity. So, Solar Rotary, there's a plaque there that credits the artist and provides the title, but there's a second plaque there that identifies the site as the *Tampa Tribune* Plaza. So, we had the funds to build it. The piece itself is an amazing place. It functions as a henge, meaning that, like Stonehenge, it utilizes the movement of the sun, vis a vis, a particular place on Earth to mark certain events. There are five

historic dates associated with the state of Florida that are marked in plaques, twelve inch long plaques in the ground plain. These plaques each mention the historic date, for instance the date that Ponce de Leon first sited Florida. I believe it's March 27. Each year on March 27 at a time specific, 12:17 pm, the plaque is perfectly surrounded by a shadow cast from the structure itself. There is, in the center of Solar Rotary, twenty feet above ground plain, there is a circular form created by using the materials that the piece was built out of, a five and five-sixteenths inch diameter of pipe that's held aloft and causes a circular shadow to be cast on a ground plain. Well, that circular shadow perfectly centers the plaque in such a fashion that the shadows cast from the horizontal pulls are precisely equidistance to either side of the circular shadow. All of this was critical to the artist and critical to the project. I mentioned Professor Emeritus Jack Robinson and his role. We're wanting to calculate where a shadow will fall at a specific time on a specific day at a specific site. That was three years of research and development that was required. We worked with Jack to do the calculations. We worked with graduate students from engineering to do measurements down to a tolerance of one-one hundred and twenty-eighth of an inch for any placement of any part of that sculpture so that the piece would in fact function in the atomic moment that it was predicted to function in. Then, the piece had to be built to exacting tolerances. No dimension of the piece could be off by anything more than a quarter of an inch in any direction; vertical, horizontal, distance from the ground plain, etc; or the piece simply wouldn't function. It in fact works, and we've checked this to the atomic moment. On these occasions, this is say five plaques, and [on] local apparent noon on the day of summer solstice these solar events occur where a very precise alignment is visible to the viewer, provided it's a sunny

day. If you recall this year, a week ago Saturday was summer solstice and we were having an awful lot of rain. However, the sun's movement through the sky slows down just a little bit around solstice, and so you can see it a few days before or a few days after. Now, it's not exact. It's off a little bit to the north, or a little bit to the south but it's pretty darn close. We had the opportunity, my assistant and I, to go visit the site this past Monday at local apparent noon, which here by the way occurs between 1:31 and 1:32 pm. That's a calculation of where we are longitudinally. Of course, the fact that we are in daylight savings time. Clocks move ahead an hour whereas on the western edge of the eastern time zone, so local apparent noon occurs between 1:31 and 1:32 pm for the day of summer solstice. We went there the other day at that time and sure enough our shadow was there to kind of celebrate the solstice.

G: It All Heals Up is a current or 2002 art project, can you talk about that project?

A: Yeah, that was a project done by, Jim Rosenquist, and [through his] ongoing relationship with the university and actually [is] one of the reasons that I first came here back in 1976. Recently, the university built, with the assistance of All Children's Hospital, a brand new pediatrics facility for the St. Petersburg campus. It's a facility that brought into the university some of the leading scientists and doctors working on diseases that afflict children, and they would be housed in this new research facility, designed in part by the local architectural firm Albert Alfonso. [They've] done a number of wonderful buildings. In this particular building they were creating a five-story structure that had one wall approximately forty feet wide and five stories high of solid brick. He gave us an opportunity for a site that was rather unusual. The wall seemed to beg to have something on it. The something on it, as it turns out, is a giant band-aid, a forty feet long [and] ten

feet wide, designed and then painted by James Rosenquist as a gift to the university. Again, generosity plays such a big role in what we're able to do. It's funny, a lot of our budgets are in the thirties, this one happened to be $37,000. So, as we sat together as a group, the selection committee said it would be really wonderful if we could do a major project for that wall, but that's going to involve an artist who can work in that scale, and it's an image that will present in downtown St. Petersburg, we really need a top-notch artist and this isn't a very big budget, what do you think? Margaret Miller was actually one of the art experts sitting on that committee as was Peter Foe who is the curator for our collection, and myself. We all sort of sat around and Peter finally suggested, you know maybe we could ask James Rosenquist if he would kind of contribute his services. I thought, that's an idea. Jim has a great affinity for children and particularly is concerned about children who suffer from various illnesses. I called Jim, I asked him, and about a year later after I sent him a brick for the building he wanted to know what color that brick was. It was very important to his decision to do this project, but after he got a sample of a brick for the building he said yeah I'll do it and I'll do it for free. The reason he wanted that brick is the band-aid is almost like being peeled up from the skin of the building. He saw the brick as a metaphor for human skin. He wanted a brick that would reference a diverse group of races, so it couldn't be sort of a bright white or a sort of pinkish brick, it needed to be something that could suggest white, African, American Indian, a myriad of races. It was the right color, and so Jim agreed to do the project. He designed a project that was more than the budget that we had. Even though he wasn't taking any money, we still needed to build it and it was going to exceed the budget. I turned to Dennis Sexton who's president of All Children's Hospital Foundation at the

time, and who obviously does fundraising for them, and said Dennis we're going to need significant additional dollars. He said well what do you think? I said somewhere in the vicinity of $100,000; we haven't checked it all out yet, but that's probably what it would take. He said I think I could help you out with that. I'll make some calls. Twenty-four hours later I got a call from him saying look, I used to play little league baseball with this guy and he's agreed to donate $100,000 to the project. The guy is Raymond James from Raymond James financial institution. They contributed $100,000, which enabled us to build the project and to set up an endowment that will maintain the project in fortuity. So, the idea of the band aid that Jim had, he's a pop artist so his work derives from popular culture, he wanted an image on the building that would immediately let children know as they go by that this place is about them, it's for them and about them. A kid's band-aid that's sort of a bright, decorative band-aid is something that all kids relate to. Jim has children and he talked about occasionally putting band-aids on his kid's finger even though there wasn't anything wrong there, just because it made him feel better. He felt that if we put a band-aid up there, that was brightly decorated like a kid's band-aid, that kids would understand. The day we were installing it I had the opportunity to watch a group of kids going by with their mom. [They] immediately looked up and said, "Mom, Mom look, it's a giant band-aid! This is for us." Jim Rosenquist was there taking this in with just this wonderful smile. Again, one feels so strongly about projects when you're there so closely involved, but with good reason. To see the effect that this has, again, in the public realm is also something that kind of keeps you going, not just to myself but to the others that are involved.

G: I have just a couple more questions. I would love to get to every public art project, but

unfortunately we can't. What projects would you like to talk about that are significant or special to you or the university or to some of the regional campuses?

A: That's always a tough question. Each project in its own way holds special memories for me. There are clearly projects that have had a larger impact because they're larger in scale, they simply assume a greater role within the university. One of those projects is a piece that we did with the San Francisco-based artist Doug Hollis called Unspecific Gravity. It is typical to what we try to do in terms of creating a project that is for and about a discipline. In this particular case, Unspecific Gravity makes reference to the fact that water is used as a measurement for specific gravity. This piece is about water. It's about molecular structures. Doug created, on a one-acre site, a garden with a significant contribution, again, from a local contributor, Time Warner Communications. That functions as a gathering place, as a place where elements of science are reflected in the fountain, which is made up of a series of stainless steel columns holding aloft molecular models for the H2O molecule, with seats that take the form of a hemispherical shape, an atom split in half if you will, embedded in the surface of these seats, the electronic structure of the eleven most common elements [is represented]. Brass embedded in terrazzo [is used] to make this expression so the electron, proton, neutron; the symbol for the element, also embedded in the terrazzo seats. Drip line areas, something as simple as a cushioning for the Laurel Oak trees on that site that enable them to weather the conditions in Florida and the foot traffic. We put an amazing amount of pressure on our heels. Just walking across the roots of trees will eventually damage and kill those trees, so we put in these drip line areas made of pea rock that actually cushions the footfall of the visitors to this site. We took the desire lines of people, Doug did. [He took] those

kind of worn areas in the landscape where people want to cross and made those pathways, preventing erosion and allowing for this garden-like look. So Doug called this Unspecific Gravity, certainly one of those Tim Rollins, KLS, the project that they did for the College of Education. KLS refers to the Kids of Survival, a group of eleven students that Tim began working with in the 1980s as a teacher. Students couldn't read, and Tim was hired to teach them to read through the intervention of art. This took place at Middle School Fifty-two in South Bronx. Tim went there and realized that one of things that he could do, so that they became enthusiastic about reading is read to them, and he read the classics. He read the classics with the understanding that they would have this assignment. They would first understand what he was saying; they second would interpret what was being said by the literature; and finally, there's a carrot, they got to express what was being said in the great literature in the form of paintings. Well, this experiment took off. Tim moved to the South Bronx. He opened right next door to Middle School Fifty-two the Art and Knowledge Workshop. Kids left sort of their formal corridors of their education when the bell rang at three o'clock, and entered into their personal education where they took on everything from homework to home life and then did paintings. Eventually, they started showing the paintings. To make a very long story a bit shorter, they came to the attention of the New York art world, soon they were being invited to show in museums, they became internationally renowned as Tim Rollins' KLS. More importantly, of the original eleven kids nine of them went on to get a college education. For the College of Education, what better group to commission than Tim Rollins' KLS? They came in and in turn worked with kids from Hillsborough, Pinellas, and Pasco County, to develop the idea for two murals; one based on Kafka's *America*, a

second based on the The Frogs, a play written by Aristophanes in 405 B.C.; that now adorned the walls of the atrium area or the rotunda for the College of Education. [It is a] very special project, there are many others but those are two that I definitely would want to mention.

[end of tape A: side 1]

G: Before we end the interview there are just a couple of questions that I have. Specifically, where do you see the Public Art Program in the future, in the next decade of the University of South Florida?

A: Well, we've clearly developed a momentum. We have a collection now that increasingly is in the attention and the awareness of folks around the United States and even internationally. I think beyond the kind of recognition that the program has brought the university, there is the realization by the university that this is not only good for the people who are directly involved with the arts at the university, it's good for the entire campus in a variety of ways. I think [there is a] strong support for what we're doing. One of our needs, however, remains funding. I mentioned earlier on in the conversation that there was no funding for administration, there was no funding for maintenance. Maintenance is a reality. The university has stepped up to the responsibility by providing a very modest budget to maintain the collection. As the collection ages, like anything else, it requires more and more attention. One of my dreams for the future of the program is that the endowment that was started with the Raymond James gift and the James Rosenquist contribution be expanded to deal with the maintenance needs and the support needs that the Public Art Program has. In a more immediate sense I have some ambitions to tell the story, which you can see is always hard to squeeze into a few words,

so I think I need a book. I'm working towards developing a publication that will provide a history for the program. These are some of the immediate needs and dreams I suppose for the future of the program. In terms of projects, I think there's an interesting phenomena going on. In the United States more public art projects were built from 1975 to present than had been built in the previous 200 years history of the country, so a phenomenal amount of public art is being created for universities, for municipalities, for states. With that there is a growing sophistication in approaching the development of projects and exchanging ideas in the state of Florida. Myself and a couple of colleagues got together here in Hillsborough County a few years back. That led to the formation of a group, the Florida Association of Public Art Administrators. We're the first statewide organization for Public Art Administrators. I served a couple years as the founding president of the organization and I continue to serve on the board of directors. This, in turn, has led to a national organization. The American's for the Arts have formed a group called PAN that is a coming together of public art administrators from around the country. Dialogue is happening between folks who administer programs, and through them actually dialogue is beginning to happen with artists. Now, that seems strange. Even artists of national reputation have not had a forum to get together and discuss their ideas. There's a coming together of the folks that will move public art forward. I see that as explosively exciting over the next ten to twenty years; the more that there's exchange, the more I think new ideas will percolate and new directions will be found, investigated, and supported. Those are the some of the things that I see in my, somewhat fuzzy, crystal ball.

G: In terms of public art on some of the regional campuses of USF, in looking through the

inventory of projects, you're not only coordinating projects on this campus but it seems like your coordinating projects on some of the other regional campuses.

A: Yes, I actually am responsible for the public art component for any new facility for all of the new campuses. I think it gives me a rare opportunity. I often am told by my colleagues that they envy the kind of chance I have to sort of look over the walls of the various disciplines. You know there are walls out there. It's like well I'm in medicine, and oh I'm in radio broadcasting, or I'm a whatever, a business faculty member and that's my area of specialty. A dialogue between those specialties doesn't happen very much, but I get to go peek over the walls and actually meet the scientists and the people that put on television programs and so on. It's a wonderful opportunity to enrich myself with information about those disciplines. Similarly, being able to work on the various campuses; each campus has it's own personality, it's own unique kind of presence; I get to have conversations with the folks that make those campuses unique and bring something to them. I very much feel in a way that the function is kind of bridge back and forth, and it's an exciting opportunity to get to know the vast group of folks that make up the University of South Florida in the collective sense, it doesn't just live in one place.

G: Because many of our regional campuses are going more on their own paths in terms of being more independent from the University of South Florida, is that making your work more difficult?

A: I wouldn't say more difficult, but I certainly think that as I enter any project I enter it with the recognition that the folks that I'm working with have an awful lot of vested interest. They've been [there for] years in bringing that project to the place where it actually could be built, the new facility I refer to here. In the case of campus

administrators, their years in developing that unique quality that makes a given branch campus special. Yes, they want to be heard, and we'd be foolish not to listen with an open mind to what their ideas are. So if you mean that as I enter the campus do I come in with the guns loaded and ready to roll, no. I try to leave the vessel empty, ready to be filled with information. One of the remarkable things, and I mean this, is to be able to walk into an area that you have no expertise in and leave after four years, certainly not being a scholar in the field but having some appreciation for what's going on, that makes the job rich. [There's] the same kind of parallel when one moves from one campus to the other. So no, not more difficult, more interesting.

G: I have two more questions. In your fourteen years of history here at the university, what are you most proud of?

A: I think the fact that we've been able to put together a collection that enables the viewer to move through it almost in a way that they would move through a museum. One of the potentials of a university collection is that the works aren't so far apart, as they might be in a city, that there is no visual dialogue between one work of art and the other. That's possible on the campus, but what was critical is that that happen at the highest possible level, in other words, that we were able to bring in the leading contributors. Then, when we do projects with regional artists they're working to that standard. So the kind of dialogue that happens between our pieces, A, that it's possible, and, B, that it happens to the highest level. I think those two things make me particularly proud. That's occurred on the Tampa campus, it's occurred on the St. Petersburg campus. Quite frankly, we haven't had project opportunities sufficient to make that apparent in Sarasota, and we're just now getting to do some projects over in Lakeland. So there's more to go, but we

have two campuses up and running in terms of the public art collection. It's like visiting that sculpture park that I wondered where it was all those many years ago. It's starting to be there.

G: This is the final question. This is something that I've asked all of my interviewees. If you could leave a statement for the camera either to future students, faculty, colleagues, etc., or to all the wonderful people that you've worked with over the years what would you want to say about the University of South Florida and it's influence on your career?

A: Well, in a very strange sense I would say, 'stay young.' By that, I mean one of the real advantages of coming to the University of South Florida in the 1970s as I did, is that it was an institution with great ambition and with great potential. It wasn't locked in to a kind of tradition that prevented it from thinking beyond the edges. The very fact that I could come here and sort of dream of building a sculpture park with a pocket full of change, if you will; that Donald Sachs could come here and create sort of out of nothing a graphic studio, which would have an impact on the print world measured in a worldwide fashion, that was possible because there was youth in the institution. So, if I had a recommendation for future generations, it would be [to] stay young.

G: Vincent, thank you very much.

A: You're welcome.